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INFO RUEHSW/AMEMBASSY BERN 1399
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 8026
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 9916
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ FEB LIMA 5885
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 0105
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RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL 4287
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UNCLAS BOGOTA 000470

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MILLIONS OF COLOMBIANS MARCH AGAINST THE FARC

REF: BOGOTA 376

Summary

¶1. On February 4, millions of Colombians in Bogota and dozens of other cities marched against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and kidnapping. As many as two million marched in Bogota, in what leading daily "El Tiempo" described as the largest demonstration in Colombian history. No violence was reported. Organizers also coordinated simultaneous marches across Latin America, in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. The march captured international attention after two hostages released in January shared first-hand accounts of the FARC's inhumane treatment of hostages. While a myriad of groups and causes jumped on the event's bandwagon, organizers retained their original clear focus against kidnapping and the FARC. Some hostage family members, leadership of the opposition Polo Party, and Senator Piedad Cordoba were heavily criticized for not supporting the march. End Summary.

Massive, Historic Crowds

¶2. The February 4 march generated historically huge turnouts in Colombia's major cities -- including an estimated one to two million participants in Bogota and a half million in Cali. Major thoroughfares in Bogota were thronged with demonstrators shouting "No more FARC!" and "Liberty!" Crowds in Bogota overflowed the Plaza Bolivar and surrounding streets, and Bogota's Seventh Avenue leading to the Plaza was a sea of people for miles. The Media reported that the march was the largest demonstration in Colombian history, and longtime Bogota residents were stunned at the level of participation. Contacts told us the scale of the demonstration represented a change in thinking since the late 1990s, showing a new sense of pride and civic duty. As one observer said, "we are not afraid of the FARC anymore." El Tiempo similarly hailed an "awakening of civil society" and an "end to indifference."

¶3. Domestic protests were joined by smaller marches on February 3 and 4 in cities around the world, from Tokyo and Sydney to Paris and Istanbul. In Colombia and abroad marches occurred in a total of 193 cities. In the U.S., events were held in Washington, New York, and Atlanta, among others. Venezuelans participated in Caracas and Maracaibo. Peruvian President Alan Garcia saluted protesters singing the Colombian anthem on the steps of the government palace in Lima. In Rome, the Pope issued a plea for the hostages' release. The marches were peaceful and there were no reported incidents of violence or other trouble. Bogota Police Chief GEN Rodolfo Palomino praised the crowd's orderliness, saying, "Never have we seen such good behavior."

Noted Participants

¶4. The GOC encouraged its employees and officials to participate, and President Alvaro Uribe joined the march in Valledupar (Cesar), where he expressed "gratitude to all Colombians who today have expressed with dignity and strength the rejection of kidnapping and of the kidnappers." Colombian Ambassador to the U.S. Carolina Barco lent her support in Washington, D.C. Clara Rojas, one of the victims released last month, joined in Bogota, saying it was a historic moment to see all of Colombia united. She said she hoped the FARC would hear their message and release all hostages. In Bogota political leaders from across the E spectrum joined the march. Liberal Party leader and former-President Cesar Gaviria said, "this is an expression of civil society that the country has never seen."

Criticism of the Critics

¶5. Some hostage family members, leadership of the opposition Polo Democratico Party, and Senator Piedad Cordoba explicitly abstained from the march. Family members declined to participate, they said, for fear of FARC reprisals. Polo held a separate rally, ostensibly because the main march was an endorsement of President Uribe. Still, Bogota mayor and leading Polo politician Samuel Moreno praised the event as a "march of hope." Leading Polo centrists including former mayor Lucho Garzon and Senator Gustavo Petro broke with Polo leadership and joined the march. The media and leading politicians criticized the Polo, especially Party leader Carlos Gaviria, and pointed out that a rejection of the FARC need not imply support for any other forms of violence or criminality. Senator Piedad Cordoba, speaking from Caracas, reportedly called the event "a march of hate, of racism, of classism, and of exclusion."

Brownfield